Ministry of Agriculture

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
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Saskatchewan

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Log Number: 08-03-11
Week of January 21, 2008

PROJECT LOOKS AT LINK BETWEEN STRESS AND DISEASE SEVERITY IN CATTLE

A research project completed by scientists at the University of Saskatchewan's Vaccine and Infectious Disease Organization (VIDO) is breaking new ground in identifying the relationship between stress and disease susceptibility in cattle.

The research sought to identify biomarkers associated with stress, as stress makes animals more susceptible to a number of diseases, such as bovine respiratory disease.

"We tried to address a very old question with a new insight," said Dr. Palok Aich, the project leader of the VIDO team which undertook the research. "We knew that stress plays an important role in the mortality of cattle."

The team investigated how changes in certain blood compounds, called metabolites, can be used as "biomarkers," to predict the dangerous combination of stress and disease.

"We already knew there were certain elements that could actually be measured that correlate with stress. We found that the most common marker was not very reliable because it fluctuates," Aich said.

"If we could find something better, we would be able to identify whether the animal is going through stress – and, if so, how much stress and will it increase the animal's susceptibility to disease?"

What puzzles scientists is that exposure to viruses or bacteria cause disease in some individual animals, but not in others. Bovine respiratory disease involves an interaction of viral and bacterial infections, and is a disease most likely associated with stress-susceptible animals.

"We found a group of markers using various types of new technologies on any fluid sample, like blood," explained Aich. "These markers are at the levels of proteins, or metabolites, or even minerals present in blood. Then, we can determine whether or not the particular group of markers is associated with a particular type of stressor, and, if we can change the trend of these markers, how that will affect the outcome for the animals."

The refinement of biomarker tracking could result in identifying disease-susceptible animals at the feedlot or the ranch, allowing for earlier intervention and handling methods that will minimize stress.

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An important aspect of this project was to help producers understand the effect of handling-related stress and disease susceptibility, and to help in the identification of susceptible animals.

"The problem is the difficulty in identifying exactly when animals become infected," said Aich. "What we have to do is understand how long these markers are stable in the animal's system. We can then tell which markers are a predictor of what will happen to a particular animal if it becomes infected, before the disease is present."

The VIDO study was funded by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture's Agriculture Development Fund, the Ontario Cattlemen's Association, Genome Prairie, Genome British Columbia, and Inimex Pharmaceuticals Inc. The results of the study have now been published in the scientific journal Omics.

VIDO scientists will be pursuing future funding to move their experimental results into a clinical setting as a diagnostic tool.

A copy of the ADF report, *Proteomic Investigation of Molecular Basis of Stress and Disease Resistance in Cattle*, project number 20020145, can be obtained by phoning Saskatchewan Agriculture at (306) 787-5929, or downloaded from the Saskatchewan Agriculture website at www.agriculture.gov.sk.ca.

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BEEF AND FORAGE SYMPOSIUM MAKES ITS RETURN

The popular Saskatchewan Beef and Forage Symposium is back for another year, and is scheduled to take place February 6 and 7 in Saskatoon.

The symposium is intended to help producers increase production efficiency, explore alternative markets, improve land stewardship and produce better beef at a lower cost.

According to Murray Feist, a Ruminant Nutrition Specialist with the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture, the conference started as a bi-annual event. As it became more successful, organizers began holding the workshop every year. Over time, more and more groups have come together to work on it, and the session has built up quite a following.

"We've got fairly strong representation from a wide cross-section of the beef industry in developing this symposium," Feist said. "There should be something on the program that appeals to almost everybody in the industry."

Among the groups who now collaborate on the event are the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, the Saskatchewan Stock Growers Association, the Saskatchewan Cattle Feeders Association, the Saskatchewan Forage Council, the University of Saskatchewan and the Western Beef Development Centre.

The two-day symposium has been divided into six sessions, each exploring an important area in the beef industry: Surviving Change; Staying Competitive in the Global Environment; Defusing Animal Health Landmines; Biofuels and Beef; Management and Behaviour Strategies to Improve Profits; and the Business of Grazing.

The program is generally aimed at presenting both the research going on in the field and the practical application of that research at the producer level. "What we try to do is have some of the researchers and technical experts come and talk about the findings that are coming to light, and then follow up with a producer who is taking that technology and actually using it," Feist noted. "So those who attend get a bit of both the theory and the practice."

The majority of speakers who will be addressing the conference are from right here in Saskatchewan. Feist says there is a good reason for that.

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"The symposium is a way for us to promote some of the current Saskatchewan research that's going on," he stated. "If we need experts from somewhere else, we will bring them in, but we try to use this seminar, as much as possible, as a showcase for the quality work that gets done locally by some really good people in the province, whether they're producers or researchers, with the university or with government."

Conference organizers feel the program will appeal to all stakeholders in the beef industry, but it is really put together with one main audience in mind. "We try to target it towards producers," said Feist. "We try to showcase some of the success stories, gather leading edge people, and share the technology and current information that is going to help them stay competitive and profitable, and develop a successful beef industry here in the province despite any challenges being faced."

Those wanting to find out more about the program for the 2008 Saskatchewan Beef and Forage Symposium can download the conference brochure from the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture website at www.agriculture.gov.sk.ca or contact Murray Feist at (306) 694-3492.

Registration information can be found on the brochure, or can be obtained by contacting Brenda Freistadt with the Western Beef Development Centre at (306) 682-3139.

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AGRI-TOURISM ANSWERS DEMAND FOR REAL-LIFE EXPERIENCES

A group of farm buildings and a herd of cattle may look pretty ordinary to Saskatchewan residents, but they could be a tourist gold mine, according to Claude-Jean Harel.

Harel should know. He's the owner of Great Excursions of Regina, and a specialist in agri-tourism development.

"The time has never been better to look at agri-tourism opportunities," Harel said. "People are realizing the value of locally grown products. Behind every product there is a story, and authenticity is key."

Harel has been in the industry since 1998, beginning his company by showcasing Saskatchewan destinations and since expanding to offer experiences right across Canada.

"Our offerings in Saskatchewan are centred around authentic activities, like stays on guest ranches where people raise livestock and are willing to share that experience with guests from other parts of the world," he stated. "Our clients are usually people who are well-traveled, who have been to other parts of the world, and who want to find out about the grasslands environment and what comes with that. We are using an agricultural resource like ranching to stage value-added experiences and create new products for these producers."

It's not just recreational tourists who are interested in agriculture-based experiences. There is also a corporate market.

"We can use these experiences as team-building activities," Harel said. "There are opportunities for enterprises to take their staff outside their comfort zones and discover new relationships that they can work with."

Great Excursions and its partners in Saskatchewan have created tourism programs for guests from as far away as South Korea, which sent a group of 4-H students to the Beaver Creek Ranch near Lumsden.

"They needed some help to create a program for them that involved not only staying at the ranch, but doing the other activities available here, like visiting a Hutterite colony or taking in the RCMP-themed attractions in Regina," Harel said.

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Great Excursions has also hosted visitors from the U.S., Scotland, Belgium, France and England, and are getting increasingly more interest from Asia.

Harel has translated his passion for the agri-tourism industry into a second career as a facilitator of workshops on agri-tourism development. He will soon be visiting Nebraska, at the invitation of the governor of that state, to participate in a rural tourism conference.

"It's a way to preserve dedicated lands for agriculture," Harel stated. "We try to work with them to develop and market tourism products that make it more attractive for producers to stay engaged in agriculture."

Harel recommends that any producer considering entry into the tourism market start with local or regional tourism associations.

"The first step is to carry out an inventory of the resources that you have, to understand what kinds of knowledge and skills you have, as well as your physical facilities. The next step is identifying potential partners, such as your local tourism organization and other partners that may be willing to work with you," he stated.

"When they market an event, they want to know what other products they can bundle together to create packages that will allow visitors to benefit from the richness of the experiences we can offer in Saskatchewan."

Many farmers and ranchers may not realize that what they do to produce food and make value-added products is of great interest to others who do not share this province's heritage. According to Harel, our secret ingredient is ourselves. "Being who you say you are and trying to develop something that's unique to you is the formula," he said.

Harel welcomes new entrants to the agri-tourism sector. "Come to Tourism Saskatchewan events and meetings. Get engaged and become active stakeholders in the industry, and together we will make Saskatchewan shine on the world tourism scene."

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BEEF PRODUCERS CONSIDERING UMBRELLA GROUP

Two key meetings this month could see two associations that represent Saskatchewan beef producers joining forces to create one unified voice for the industry.

Saskatchewan Stock Growers Association (SSGA) president Dennis Fuglerud said the idea of uniting his group and the Saskatchewan Cattle Feeders Association (SCFA) has been in the works for a while.

"About a year ago, it was suggested that maybe we should have an outside group take a look at the Saskatchewan beef industry and our representative structure, and just see if there were any improvements that could be made," Fuglerud explained.

Framework Consultants of Calgary looked into the issue and brought back a report last May. The report called for an umbrella group to be formed, and a new board created with elected cattle producer representatives from each of the nine crop districts in Saskatchewan. Two of the districts would each have an extra member, due to the high cattle populations in those regions.

Fuglerud picks up the story from there.

"We dealt with the recommendations at the AGM in June, and the membership directed us to look at the options," he said. "A committee was formed to investigate, and they will bring back a report at our semi-annual meeting in January. We will be looking to our membership for further direction from there."

The SSGA semi-annual meeting will be held January 18 in Regina. The SCFA annual general meeting begins January 24 in Saskatoon.

Fuglerud says there is something to be gained by bringing the two associations together.

"The Saskatchewan beef industry would be speaking with a unified voice. That means more clout when speaking to government," he noted.

Fuglerud added that industry groups have already been working together as much as possible when their views on important issues were consistent. "If the membership gives us the go ahead, we would have a more formalized structure for what we have been doing already," he said.

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Bill Jameson, President of the SCFA, agrees with Fuglerud.

"We have had very good success going to government with a unified voice. In the past, we have given government mixed signals as to the direction our industry would like to go. This was mostly due to the right hand not knowing what the left hand was doing, and more times than not, we were actually asking for the same thing," he said.

"Although each cattle group may have some different priorities, we believe, at the end of the day, we are all working toward a viable and productive beef industry."

There are also some financial benefits that the umbrella group could achieve. At present, a government-administered industry committee determines how check-off dollars are spent. Fuglerud says the new umbrella group could seek to assume those responsibilities.

"This is what is done in every other province in the country," he noted. "It would be a bit of a change from what we do now, because our structure is that we go to the check-off committee to request funds to be able to hire policy analysts, for example. If the new organization has control of the check-off, it would be able to determine where those resources will be directed."

For now, the process forward will depend on what the respective memberships have to say about the idea of a unified industry voice.

"We are ready to make a presentation to the two association membership meetings and look for direction from the members whether we should pursue this or perhaps a different direction," Fuglerud said. "We'll know a lot more by the end of January."

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A TALE OF TWO FARM SUCCESSION PLANS

In the Langenburg area, there are two brothers, both of them life-long farmers. They have similar operations, but have taken different paths to passing their farms on to a new generation.

It was 1973 when brothers Jim and Tom Werle decided to take over the family farm from their parents. Three decades later, each of the brothers put in place a succession plan that would see his half of the operation assumed by someone younger.

In the case of Jim Werle and his wife Elsie, the decision was to sell to their daughter Jenay and her husband Zach. For Tom Werle and wife Maxine, the new owners would be a young couple who decided to relocate from Alberta to operate their own farm.

Jim and Elsie have a 1,500 acre farm that is currently focused on a 350-head cow-calf operation on which they finish their own calves. "We are already a corporation, and issuing shares to the kids is a very simple way of succession planning," Jim said.

They have not set a time-line by which the takeover must be complete. Elsie Werle says it gives both parties a chance to make the transition.

"It works out well, because as time goes on, we won't need as much to live on as we do now," she noted. "As time goes on, the kids will just buy more shares, and the more shares they have, the more ownership they'll have."

Her thoughts are echoed by Jenay, a 26 year-old with an agriculture degree and a career in economic development. "My husband and I weren't in a position to buy them outright," she said. "Slowly buying them out and purchasing the shares just made sense financially for us."

Jenay feels the key step to any smooth transition is a clear plan.

"It's nice to have a documented plan," she said. "We've run into a few times where we assumed that we were all on the same page, but we weren't. By having a definite plan, it helps alleviate some of that."

Another important aspect for the Werles was to provide for a second daughter, who did not see farming in her future. A special life insurance policy and proper language in their will guarantees that she will

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receive her due inheritance at the time of her parents' passing.

Bankers, accountants, and lawyers have all been important resources. "They're not free or cheap, but their advice and guidance is worthwhile," Jenay said. "They are professionals who assist people with this kind of thing all the time."

On the farm of Tom and Maxine Werle, the successor was outside the family. Vince and Erin Schnee's family farm was not large enough to support Vince, his father and his brother, so he decided to make the move to Saskatchewan.

The Schnees were able to take advantage of a Farm Credit Corporation program that provides financing for a buy-out of equity over time, rather than all at once.

Vince notes that the arrangement to buy or sell an operation can take many directions. "I would say: 'think creatively,'" he said. "It doesn't have to be a cut-and-dried thing in which everything is sold and bought on the same day."

Their operation now comprises about 250 bred cows, and they also do custom feeding for up to 1,300 head at a time.

For the Schnees, the biggest lesson learned through this major change in their lives is that it was tougher than they expected. "Really do your homework, if you are buying," Vince advised. "Double your forecast expenditures for making the move. We also over-estimated how much we could physically do on our own."

Now, four years into their new life, Vince says they are truly at home.

"I think there was a perception by some at first that we were 'rich Albertans.' But they soon realized that our equipment was a lot older than theirs," he chuckled. "We've gotten to know and work with quite a few neighbours now."

The bottom line in any succession plan is that, regardless of the type of deal you create, the relationship between the two parties is critical. The Schnees can attest to that.

"Tom and Maxine have been extremely good to us and our family," Vince said. "Tom still helps out once in a while. They are like second grandparents to our kids, so they are good friends as well as business associates."

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